

Election campaign and political advertising

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The high-profile stage of the election campaign began on February 9 after a 40-day moratorium on political advertising, imposed by the Central Election Commission (CEC) in accordance with the election law (Article 50). As the law did not forbid political advertising and campaigning before the official start of the campaign on December 30, 2001, most of political parties, blocks and individual candidates that take part in the race have benefited from the situation as much as they could.

According to the CEC chairman Mykhailo Ryabets, during the no-campaigning period journalists were not allowed to analyze political parties', blocks' and candidates' agendas, as, in his opinion, journalists «must inform the population about the course of events in the state and must not make any comments about political parties, blocks or candidates for the parliament.» According to the CEC, from December 31 onwards the CEC was keeping an eye on any violations of the election law. Meanwhile, it was not clear what violations would be traced, as there is no legal definition of political advertising and campaigning. According to members of the CEC Marina Stavnijchuk, the Ukrainian law does not have definitions for a number of other notions that would «assist legal regulation of the pre-election campaigning – for instance, of «political advertising» and «political campaigning» (Vysoky Zamok, January 8, 2002). Such gaps were also mentioned by another members of the CEC, Oleksandr Nelga. Yet, multiple efforts of MPs and the CEC to create a coherent and effective set of legal provisions for political campaigning and political advertising proved to be feckless. The gaps, in fact, have been useful for a vast majority of participants of the election race, as well as for the CEC – the former have been able to break the rules without facing liability, and the latter have been able to claim there is nothing they can do about it. The lack of clear definitions has opened the way for free interpretation of campaigning and political advertising without an opportunity to stop them as violations of the law.

Almost all participants of the election race did campaign and advertise themselves during the 40-day «moratorium» – from New Year greetings by party leaders to advertising in newspapers, left, right and centrist. The propaganda was subtler than usually, and the lack of clarity in the law made it impossible to stop the political advertising efforts.

According to the Committee of Voters of Ukraine, in January 2002 the CVU's monitoring program recorded «multiple facts of campaigning that could be interpreted in different ways, though, in our opinion, the predominant majority of them could not be classed as propaganda that is not related to the elections». According to the CVU, «the ban on campaigning was more frequently violated by those political parties (blocks) and candidates that enjoyed support of the administrative resource, which could be explained by broader opportunities for campaigning and confidence that there would be no punishment, due to questionable interpretation of the law».

The most common violations during the moratorium on advertising were «the use of official position by local government and self-governance officials (as well as by executive officers of enterprises and organizations) in support of the block «Za Yedynu Ukrainu!» and some candidates in majoritarian constituencies», «administrative pressure on subjects of the election process and the media», «campaigning by means of provision of free or discount goods and services», «dissemination of information (campaigning) on behalf of a competitor». Yet, not a single official complaint from a political party or block about such violations of the election law have been received by the CEC.

The start of campaigning by political parties, blocks and individual candidates give little chance to think that the 2002 campaign will use anything principally new in terms of political advertising, compared to the 1998 campaign. The competition of TV ads will remain the key kind of political advertising. Other campaign techniques will include sponsoring shows and broadcasts by a political party or a block – like the «Last Hero» show sponsored by the Greens or the broadcast of the Olympics by the national public TV channel, sponsored (!) by the «block of parties of power», «ZaYedU». New projects and shows are likely to appear in February and March, as parties and blocks build up their campaigning efforts.

Another method of political advertising, in addition to paid TV spots and free TV time granted by the law to each of the participants of the race, is the opportunity for high-ranking civil servants who run for seats in the parliament to appear in the news in connection with their official duties. Indirectly, such appearances are manifestations of the «administrative resource» that is widely used by the «ZaYedU» block. For instance, some of regional and international trips of presidential chief of staff Volodymyr Lytvyn were used for presentation of his election block, «ZaYedU» – like his recent official trip to Russia, which he used, among other things, for presenting his block. The 1998 experience of then «party of power», the People's Democratic Party (now a member of the «ZaYedU» block) showed that the practice could save substantial resource and ensure broad impact. Such state-sponsored PR opportunities and information about official activities of civil servants – leaders of the block (including public reports and declarations about improvement of economic indicators and positive actions of the government) can be used for advertising the block – something under a slogan like «we work while others engage in demagogy». For instance, number 2 in the «ZaYedU», Prime Minister of Ukraine Anatoly Kinakh announced that «the main campaigning material of the government in the elections will be effective professional work...» (Uriadovyi Kurrier, January 24, 2002).

Naturally, parties and blocks will have different political advertising campaign strategies. For instance, according to political scientist and number 62 of Nasha Ukraina Mykola Tomenko, «even if Nasha Ukraina does not engage into any political campaigning and advertising, but will only face criticism by political opponents, the block will receive at least 19 or 20 percent of the 225 seats» (Chas, January 25, 2002). Notwithstanding a certain irony of the statement, it does make sense, though the most important for the block will be not to overload voters with too many references to «morality» and «spirituality» and not to get stuck in the compromat games initiated by competitors.

Expensive pre-election TV spots are simply «prohibited» for the «protest parties», «parties of working people» or those that wish to look that way, primarily the CPU, the Socialists, the

CPU(renewed) and the Communist Party of Workers and Peasants. Those parties have to choose other techniques that will be addressed below.

According to director of the Ukrainian Institute of Social Studies Oleksandr Yaremenko, public opinion polls at the end of 2001, political TV ads are among the most common manifestation of political parties' activities. Only 7% of the respondents did not see any political ads. (Den, December 27, 2001).

The 1998 election results show domination of television in political advertising. According to the SOCIS-Gallup study at the end of 1997, before the 1998 parliamentary elections, almost 62 percent of Ukrainians received social and political information through television, and 38 percent get it from the radio, while the print media supply only 18 percent of information. The situation remains similar in the 2002 campaign.

As far as effectiveness of political advertising is concerned, according to sociologists, about 26% of respondents say they «may change their mind under the influence of [political ads]» (Den, December 27, 2001). Hence, political ads play an important role in formation of opinions of voters. In the 1998 elections, a positive advertising strategy of the Green party, based on depoliticized TV ads, proved that political ads and substantial funds may be instrumental in obtaining the desired results.

35 parties and blocks and over 4 thousand majoritarian candidates take part in the 2002 race, and the volume of political advertising they are likely to produce may make the voters' choice difficult. However, not all of the participants of the race are in the same position regarding their capacity to advertise themselves and their influence on voters. The point is not only the use of the «administrative resource» and the violation of the equal access principle, though representatives of the opposition parties of Yulia Tymoshenko's block and Oleksandr Moroz's Socialists do have problems with getting access to the media. The problem is also not only the lack of funding, needed for proper political advertising – the question is whether a number of recently created parties and blocks be able to advertise themselves vigorously enough to become known to voters within such a short period of time.

Usually at least a few weeks are required to make sure that a specific product becomes recognized by potential buyers - provided a good advertising strategy and substantial investment in professional TV ads. However, political ads of parties and blocks still differ from advertising of goods – not as much in a sense of political agendas the parties and blocks have. The experience of previous elections shows that voters usually do not vote for agendas and proposals, but make their choice irrationally. There are a number of political and organizational reasons for that: in Ukraine there are practically no mechanisms of societal control over implementation of agendas of political parties (blocks), while parties and blocks focus in their agendas on naming various problems but hardly propose any solutions.

Previous experience of political advertising does not allow a clear answer whether the fact that voters know about a party or block from TV ads actually serves as an important factor for choosing that party or block. A recent example is the massive TV advertising campaign of the New Generation party. Notwithstanding massive appearances in the TV ads, the party remains

an outsider of the race. The reasons may vary – from unsuccessful interpretation of the idea of the party to the lack of a charismatic leader who would be seen positively by voters of different age groups. Unlike the leader of «depoliticized» Greens in 1998, the leader of the New Generation is actually present in the ads as the key face of the party, but the party itself remains perceived as a virtual creation that exists only in TV ads.

The presence of multiple participants of the race will increase competition in the TV ads market and create excessive «supply» of political ads, which will make it even more difficult for voters to make distinction between different players of the elections.

Meanwhile, it is clear that parties and blocks that already have their factions in the parliament and have launched their political advertising efforts on the TV well in advance through the so-called social ads will be in a privileged position. According to the survey by the Democratic Initiatives, «What do parties need to win?», 29 percent of voters from different regions of Ukraine named «successful prior activity». Some of the parties, however, simply cannot claim any previous activity, though in some cases it is better not to have a history than try and break an earlier unfavorable image.

Therefore, political parties that are represented in this parliament will be able to appeal to their previous record of accomplishments within the past four years and present their reports as the basis for the campaign strategy. This method, for instance, is being explored by the SDPU(o). The approach also allows taking into account regional aspects of parties' activities, like those of the Greens in Odessa and Mykolayiv.

This election campaign has broadly used counter-advertising and «compromat», disseminated through leaflets and the Internet. Besides, in addition to a complex of advertising techniques there is a method of direct, door-to-door campaigning. The method seems to be natural for so-called «ideological» and «protest» parties that are able to show to voters their real presence and lack of «suspicious» money. In most of countries the method involved volunteers that allows substantial reduction of campaign costs. Nowadays, the commitment to use «only agitation methods» has been announced by Yulia Tymoshenko, who alleges her block has «70 thousand of activists of the Batkivshchyna», though the figure causes some doubts. However, the effective method of direct outreach can be used by only a few of political parties and blocks – those who have real supporters and trained campaigners – the CPU, the Socialists, the Rukhs in some regions, and, recently, the SDPU(o), i.e., the parties that have developed regional structures, and not just party organs at local state administrations and virtual membership. Otherwise the door-to-door campaign will transform into a method of administrative pressure, with officials of all levels advising to their subordinates, openly or subliminally, on how to vote. According to director of the Social Monitoring Olga Balakireva, a recent opinion poll in different regions of Ukraine show that to be the case (Ukraina i Svit Siohodni, February 9, 2002).

The door-to-door method will allow expanding political advertising efforts and taking into account specific regional issues, as the success or failure in the regions will determine the outcome of the race for every party and block. An example of the importance of performance in a region is the result received by the Hromada in the 1998 parliamentary elections. Then the Hromada managed to overcome the 4% barrier due to impressive victory in the Dnipropetrovsk

region. In the 2002 elections, the example can be followed in the Donetsk region by the Party of the Regions, by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in the Kharkiv region, and by the Trudova Ukraina in the Dnipropetrovsk region. The efforts to build regional election campaign bodies suggest that party leaderships in Kyiv are aware of the importance of the regions. Leader of the PDP and Minister of Transport Valery Pustovoitenko announces that «candidates from the PDP in the regions should make the key emphasis on drafting and propaganda of regional, district and local economic development programs». Meanwhile, he admits that although «the «ZaYedU» block has powerful media, they will work in full only if a centralized political advertising campaign in the regions will run in tune with local propaganda actions» (Ukraina i Svit Siohodni, December 1, 2001).

Political advertising through TV spots does not suit the image of «ideological» political parties like the Communist party, CPU, for their strength is direct advertising. Statistics about the CPU for the past four years, quoted by the party newspaper, the Komunist, claim that «members of the CPU faction received almost 80 thousand of voters. Over two million voters attended meetings with MPs – members of campaign and outreach groups of the CPU Central Committee» (Komunist, #63, December 2001). Yet, it is up to voters to make their choice in the political advertising of parties that risks to turn into a vanity fair.